

# When a Loved One Far Away Is Affected by a Traumatic Event

**M**ental health experts know that distance compounds stress, worry, and fear when someone you love is in harm's way. That's why so much social and mental health support exists for military families who have loved ones serving overseas.

## But What about You?

There's no similar support available when you're separated from a loved one who's affected by a traumatic event like we've recently experienced with **Hurricane Irene**. Such events can cause stress overload and emotional breakdown for families trying to cope. Here's why:

- Incomplete information/worry about the whereabouts of your loved one
- Inability to communicate due to distance/damage to communications equipment
- Feelings of helplessness
- Media images of destruction and human suffering

Here's the hardest part—in the midst of all this turmoil, everyday obligations and stressors still grind away mercilessly at your time, energy, and patience. If you're currently struggling with this situation, here's how to cope:

## Tell Your boss

There's a tendency to wall off personal issues from our professional lives, but there's a time and place to share what's going on at home—and this is one of them.

You don't have to share intimate details about your emotional state. Just make your boss aware of the situation and your concern about it in order to tip your boss off about any change in your work behavior and head off a confrontation or misunderstanding that may escalate due to your heightened stress level.

Be specific about what things can be done to help you cope (flexible hours, unscheduled time off, etc.). Most employers are willing to help employees adapt to extraordinarily difficult personal circumstances.

## Turn Off the Television

When you're starved for information, it's natural to seek answers from all available sources, but the immediacy and convenience of television news is a temptation you should avoid.

Television coverage of natural and/or human disasters often leans toward sensationalism, with images and stories selected specifically for their dramatic and emotional impact. What you're seeing may be real, but it's not an accurate representation of the broader conditions of the disaster area. Your odds of gaining any valuable *personal* information about a loved one from this coverage are slim.

## Maintain Routines

Familiarity and normalcy in everyday life provide a natural antidote to emotional upheaval. Stick to your daily schedule as much as possible, including when you eat and sleep.

If you have an existing exercise routine, keep it! It will provide a valuable physical and emotional outlet.

## Take Control of Your Environment

It's easy to be overcome by feelings of helplessness. Overcome this hurdle by focusing on things that you can control, like cleaning and organizing your surroundings and staying on top of errands.

Satisfy the compulsion to "do something" by organizing fundraising events or putting together care packages for those who need it. The indirect help you provide will help give you a sense of control and purpose.



## Find an Emotional Outlet

Talk about what you're feeling with someone you trust. Write or email your loved one even if he or she can't receive the message. Just getting your thoughts on paper is a helpful emotional release.

## Don't Forget Your kids

They have questions, concerns, and fears too. Be prudent about what information you release, but be careful not to keep them completely in the dark. Kids sense when there's a problem, and too much secrecy can increase their anxiety.

Help older children cope, by showing them how to shadow your own coping strategy. Young children who don't fully understand the situation can be encouraged to express their feelings through art projects, writing, and play.

## Seek Professional Help

Contact your EAP for additional resources and professional mental health help and advice. Your employer provides these tools for precisely these types of situations because the tools provide a proven path to wellness.



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